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## THE ENGLISH BIBLE AND ENGLISH WRITERS.

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*General use of the Bible in literature.— Shakespeare.— Bacon.— Macaulay.  
— Ruskin.— Tennyson.— Longfellow.*

EVERY student of English literature or hearer of English speech finds three works or subjects referred to (directly or indirectly), or quoted from, more frequently than others. These are the Bible, the tales of Greek and Roman mythology, and *Æsop's Fables*. (Perhaps a fourth work ought to be added, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, only that, as Venables has said, Bunyan's English was the English of the Bible.)

The scenes and the characters, wit and wisdom, pathos and humor, strength and beauty of these works are wrought into the very warp and woof of the best of our literature and are the sources of nine-tenths of all illustrations therein. Of these three the Bible furnishes by far the greatest number of references, allusions, and quotations.

Poets and essayists, scientists and critics, historians and philosophers, orators and editors use the Bible with perfect freedom and assurance, knowing that all classes of readers and hearers will catch and at once interpret their meaning, for the book is (or has been) as familiar to the one as to the other.

If our best writers—the writers that touch life and character the most helpfully in the broadest and deepest and highest sense of the word—are to be really understood so as to be appreciatively *enjoyed* by their own countrymen, then it would seem imperative that our children and young people should become more familiar with the Bible than they now seem to be. To miss the point of an allusion, or reference, or quotation, or illustration, through ignorance of their source and connection, is to miss the very highest pleasure of reading. Take from our leading

writings all biblical connection, expunge the Bible from English literature, and you leave a colorless garment.

Take first the greatest of all, Shakespeare. Charles Wordsworth has written quite a large book on Shakespeare's knowledge and use of the Bible, giving references and allusions and quotations made by the poet in thirty-seven plays, a most significant fact when we recall that Shakespeare died in 1616, only four years after King James' Version was published in full. Evidently, as Selkirk has said, the Bible must have been eminently the book after his own heart.

These citations partake of a wide range of spirit, from the somewhat coarse though humorous and pat sayings of Falstaff and the clown to the solemnity of the king in "Hamlet" and Helena in "All's Well that Ends Well."

In "King Henry IV" Falstaff thus addresses the Prince: "Dost thou hear Hal? Thou knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell, and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy?"

In "Merry Wives of Windsor" he explains: "I will tell you; he beat me grievously in the shape of a woman; for in the shape of a man, Master Brook, I fear not Goliath with a weaver's beam; because I know also life is a shuttle." In this last clause there seems to be an allusion to (Job 7:6) "my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle."

In "All's Well that Ends Well" the clown excuses himself with a humorous twist:

"I am no great Nebuchadnezzar, sir,  
I have not much skill in grass."

On the other hand, in "Hamlet," we have the king's remorseful cry:

"O my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,  
A brother's murder!"

And in "All's Well that Ends Well" Helena, the doctor's daughter, thus argues with the king:

"He that of greatest works is finisher  
Oft does them by the weakest minister:

So Holy Writ in babes hath judgment shown,  
 When judges have been babes, great floods have flown  
 From simple sources; and great seas have dried,  
 When miracles by the greatest have been denied."

Here there are five, possibly six, references to five different Bible passages in five lines, so carefully wrought into the fair young doctor's speech as to indicate a striking familiarity with the Scriptures on the part of the poet.

Lord Bacon uses quotations from the Bible or alludes to it with fine effect in a large number of his essays, and several times in some. One writer, J. B. Selkirk, says he found over seventy such references in twenty-four of the essays; and I have little doubt that a number more could be shown.

Take, for example, his happy characterization of usury in the essay entitled "Of Riches:" "Usury is the certainest means of gain, though one of the worst; as that whereby a man doth eat his bread in the sweat of another's face;" or that equally happy characterizing of the difference between Solomon and his son and successor Rehoboam in his essay on "Counsel:" "Solomon's son found the *force* of counsel as his father saw the necessity."

Men of malignant envy, he says, "are not so good as the dogs that licked Lazarus' sores, but like flies that are still buzzing upon anything that is raw."

Lord Macaulay is one of the masters of style and his advice is certainly worthy of respect. In calling upon Lady Holland one day, Lord Macaulay was led to bring the attention of his fair hostess to the fact that the use of the word "talent" to mean *gifts* or *powers* of the mind, or when we speak of men of talent, came from the use of the word in Christ's parable of the talents. In a letter to his sister Hannah he describes the incident and says that Lady Holland was evidently ignorant of the parable. "I did not tell her," he adds, "though I might have done so, that a person who professes to be a critic in the delicacies of the English language ought to have the Bible at his fingers' ends."

Now Lord Macaulay not only preached that every would-be accurate user of English should have the Bible at his fingers'

ends, but practiced what he preached, as his essays abundantly testify. The total number of such examples of use must be many hundreds, for you can find one or more on nearly every page. Perhaps one of the best examples is the following, which is, at the same time, an excellent example of his favorite use of antithesis. Let the reader recall the accounts of the closing scenes in the life of Christ as given by the writers of the gospels and he will notice that Macaulay has done no more than state the facts as there recorded. The passage may be found, by the way, in the essay on "Southey's Colloquies:"

"The whole history of Christianity shows that she is in far greater danger of being corrupted by alliance with power than of being crushed by its opposition. Those who thrust temporal sovereignty upon her do but treat her as their prototypes treated her Author. They bow the knee and spit upon her; they cry 'Hail!' and smite her on the cheek; they put a scepter in her hand, but it is a fragile reed; they crown her, but it is with thorns; they cover with purple the wounds which their own hands have inflicted upon her, and inscribe magnificent titles over the cross on which they have fixed her to perish with ignominy and pain."

What sarcasm is expressed in his description of Mill's "Essay on Government!"

"So ends this celebrated essay. And such is this philosophy for which the experience of three thousand years is to be discarded. . . . We are sick, it seems, like the children of Israel, of the objects of our old and legitimate worship. We pine for a new idolatry. All that is costly and all that is ornamental in our intellectual treasures must be delivered up and cast into the furnace—and there comes out this CALF!"

How apt and suggestive his use of the psalmist's vivid and musical words in describing the unsystematic productiveness of Bentham, the philosopher: "The fertility of his mind resembled the fertility of those vast American wildernesses in which blossoms and decays a rich but unprofitable vegetation 'where-with the reaper filleth not his hand, neither he that bindeth up the sheaves his bosom.'"

Several hours could be filled in merely reading such passages, so plentifully are they sprinkled through all his writings.

But of all the English writers, so far as I am aware, John Ruskin is the one whose use of the Bible is most frequent and telling. His works are fairly *saturated* with biblical phrases and sentences.

Take a colored pencil and, when you read your Ruskin, mark, say with red, all words, phrases, and passages evidently taken from the Bible, all allusions and all direct references, as well as actual and formal citations, and I think you will be astonished, so luminous will the pages become.

However we may view Ruskin's opinions as an art critic, a critic of life, a poet, a political economist, a philanthropist, or as a writer on things in general, no one can deny his superiority as a writer of English, but surely no small part of that charm and force and mastery comes from his marvelous use of the English Bible. Our wonder at the exceeding richness and beauty, the singular power of Bible diction and imagery in his hands, is partly explained on reading of his early training in the Bible. His mother, he tells us, was accustomed to drill him every day in reading or reciting the Bible, from the first verse of Genesis right through to the end of Revelation, over and over, from the time he could read at all till he went to Oxford. "To that discipline," he says, "I owe the best part of my taste in literature, and, once knowing the Bible, it was not possible for me to write superficial and formal English."

In reading this last sentence one is reminded of similar testimony from two other great masters of style, who were at once great artists and critics, men that are widely recognized as having left as deep marks upon modern thought as have been made by any other two minds.

Coleridge, in his *Table-Talk*, June 14, 1830, said: "Intense study of the Bible will keep any writer from being *vulgar* in point of style."

Goethe wrote: "It is a belief in the Bible which has served me as the guide of my literary life. I have found it a capital safely invested and richly productive of interest."

With Ruskin it is difficult to select from the very abundance of the material at hand, but let me give a passage that will illustrate what I have said, that his writings are fairly *saturated* with biblical phrases and sentences. I wish that these might be printed in red, but I will italicize them and the reader can hunt them down at his leisure.

This eloquent passage is found, I may say, in *Modern Painters*, Vol. IV, Part 5, chapter 19.

Mr. Ruskin has been speaking of mountain gloom "as it bears witness to the error of human choice, even when the nature of good and evil is most definitely set before it." To illustrate this he says: "The trees of paradise were fair, but our first parents hid themselves from God *in the midst of the trees of the garden*. The hills were ordained for the help of man, but instead of *raising his eyes to the hills, from whence cometh his help*, he does his idol sacrifice *upon every high hill and under every green tree*. *The mountain of the Lord's house is established above the hills*; but Nadab and Abihu shall *see under his feet the body of heaven in his clearness*, and yet go down *to kindle the censer against their own souls*. And so to the end of time it will be; to the end that cry will still be heard along the Alpine winds, '*Hear, oh ye mountains, the Lord's controversy!*' Still, their gulfs of thawless ice and unretarded roar of tormented waves, deathful falls of fruitless waste, and unredeemed decay, must be the image of souls of *those who have chosen the darkness*, and whose *cry shall be to the mountains to fall on them and to the hills to cover them*; and still to the end of time, the clear waters of unfailing springs and the white *pasture lilies in their clothed multitude*, and the abiding of the burning peaks in their nearness to the open heavens, shall be the types and the blessings of those who have chosen light, and of whom it is written, '*The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills righteousness.*'"

In that marvelously suggestive lecture on the Mystery of Life and its Arts, published as Lecture III in his *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin touches, as only he can touch, that great mystery that is now all about us, the mystery of human want and hunger and misery. Who that reads those glowing, throbbing pages

fails to feel that the climaxes are reached in the quotations at the close of the sections on weaving, building, and education, "I was naked and ye clothed me not," "I was a stranger and ye took me not in," and "For the greatest of these is charity."

I have left myself no space to let Burke and Webster and Lincoln speak. We all know with what effect those great movers of men appealed to the highest in man through the words of Holy Writ. Some of us, indeed, may have heard Lincoln open his first famous campaign "with a memorable saying which sounded like a shout from the watch-tower of history: 'A house divided against itself cannot stand;' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." I must not dwell on the prose writers, but notice briefly two or three of the most widely read of our modern poets, though we might take a score or more.

The two Brownings are replete with the Bible. There are over one hundred such uses in *Aurora Leigh* alone.

Lord Tennyson is another writer whose oft-repeated use of the Bible reveals what a marked influence it has had on him as an author.

Tennyson's felicitous use of phrases and even entire sentences is a striking proof that the prose of the Bible easily lends itself not merely to the loftiest styles of English prose and speech, but also to the most melodious of English poetry.

For evidence of this I refer the reader to George Lester's book, *Lord Tennyson and the Bible*, or to *The Poetry of Tennyson*, by H. Van Dyke, D.D., in the former of which something like 450 examples are given.

With one more example this article must close.

Longfellow, perhaps the most uniformly musical of poets, at least in pure or simple melody, fully equals, if indeed he does not surpass, Tennyson both in the number and in the felicity of his uses of the Bible.

Take but three examples, his last dedicatory sonnet to the "Divina Commedia," his sonnet entitled "Moods," and the Epilogue to the "New England Tragedies," and notice that while the language of the Bible readily falls into the rhythm of Eng-



lish verse it also yields as easily to the demands of the most melodious rhyme.

The following are the verses and parts of verses — in the second chapter of Acts — which contain the words, phrases, and sentences so beautifully fused together in the last six lines of the sonnet :

“And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind and it filled all the house. . . . Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And . . . every man heard them speak in his own language, strangers from Rome . . . and proselytes . . . and they were all amazed and in doubt.”

Longfellow thus addresses Dante :

“Thy fame is blown abroad from all the heights,  
Through all the nations, and a sound is heard  
As of a mighty wind, and men devout,  
Strangers of Rome and the new proselytes,  
In their own language hear thy wondrous word,  
And many are amazed and many doubt.”

In the second sonnet the poet has used those profoundly significant words of the Christ to the man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus :

“The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh and whither it goeth.”

The last six lines of the sonnet read :

“Alas ! not always doth the breath of song  
Breathe on us. It is like the wind that bloweth  
At its own sweet will, not ours, nor tarries long ;  
We hear the sound thereof, but no man knoweth  
From whence it comes, so sudden and swift and strong,  
Nor whither in its wayward course it goeth.”

The Finale in the “New England Tragedies” is crowded with biblical language and allusions. I will give only the last third :

“Not he that repeateth the name,  
But he that doeth the will !  
And him evermore I behold  
Walking in Galilee,  
Through the cornfield’s waving gold,

In hamlet, in wood, and in wold,  
By the shores of the Beautiful Sea.  
He toucheth the sightless eyes ;  
Before him the demons flee ;  
To the dead he sayeth : ' Arise ! '  
To the living : ' Follow me ! '  
And that voice still soundeth on  
From the centuries that are gone  
To the centuries that shall be !

From all vain pomps and shows,  
From the pride that overflows,  
And the false conceits of men ;  
From all the narrow rules  
And subtleties of schools,  
And craft of tongue and pen ;  
Bewildered in its search,  
Bewildered with the cry :  
Lo, here ! lo, there, the Church !  
Poor, sad Humanity  
Through all the dust and heat  
Turns back with bleeding feet,  
By the weary road it came,  
Unto the simple thought  
By the Great Master taught,  
And that remaineth still :  
Not he that repeateth the name,  
But he that doeth the will."